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Are You Special?

A Review of Caspar Hare's *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects*

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There is a long tradition in philosophy of exploring analogies between the modal, the temporal, and the personal.¹ This short book is an excellent addition to that tradition. It's clear, elegantly written, entertaining (in fact it is quite the page turner), and chock-full of interesting philosophical ideas.

The main thesis that Hare defends is what he calls *egocentric presentism*. This is (roughly) the view that the world contains one particular subject who is special. Hare thinks that this one, special subject is himself, but he encourages you to think it is you, and in general he thinks it makes sense for each subject to think of himself or herself as the special one. In what follows, I will take egocentric presentism to be about you.

In what way does egocentric presentism maintain that you are special? In a way that is perfectly analogous to the way in which The A-Theory in philosophy of time maintains that the present time is special. Just as The A-Theory maintains that there is a unique, monadic property, *temporal*

¹ See, for example, Aristotle's *Physics*, esp. Books VI-VIII; Arthur Prior, *Time and Modality* (Oxford University Press, 1957); Arthur Prior and Kit Fine, *Worlds, Times and Selves* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1977); Sarah Waterlow, *Passage and Possibility* (Oxford University Press, 1982); Edward N. Zalta, "On the Structural Similarities Between Worlds and Times," *Philosophical Studies* 51 (1987), pp. 213-239; Heather Dyke, "Real Times and Possible Worlds" (in Robin LePoidevin, ed., *Questions of Time and Tense* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 93-118); Ned Markosian, "Review of LePoidevin, *Questions of Time and Tense*," *Nous* 35 (2001), pp. 616-629; Ned Markosian, "A Defense of Presentism" (in Dean Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics, Vol. 1* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 47-82); and A.A. Rini and M.J. Cresswell, *The World-Time Parallel* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

presentness, that is instantiated by certain events and objects (namely, all and only the ones that occupy the present time), so too does egocentric presentism maintain that there is a unique, monadic property, *presence* (as Hare calls it), that is instantiated by certain events and objects, namely, all and only your experiences and the objects of those experiences.

To be clear, it is not merely that your experiences and their objects stand in the two-place relation *present-relative-to* to you. Everyone is such that his or her experiences (and the objects of those experiences) stand in this two-place relation to him- or herself. Hare's view is that, in addition to all of the facts about whose experiences are present relative to whom, there are also a bunch of extra facts about whose experiences are present *simpliciter*. (He emphasizes that his view is in this way analogous to The A-Theory, with its commitment to a bunch of extra "A-facts" about which objects and events are present *simpliciter*.) And it is these extra facts that make you special among all of the subjects in the world, according to Hare. You are the one with present experiences.

Why should you believe egocentric presentism? *On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects* (hereafter, *OMOLIS*) contains four main reasons for accepting this odd metaphysical doctrine: (i) a main motivation, (ii) an official main argument, (iii) an unofficial main argument, and (iv) an unauthorized argument.

(i) *The main motivation for egocentric presentism*. Most of us have certain egocentric preferences. "All other things being equal, we prefer that pain befall others rather than ourselves and pleasure befall ourselves rather than others." (*OMOLIS*, p. 2.) If someone is going to suffer from boiling water spilled on his or her hand, we prefer that it be someone else. Hare calls this preference *mild egocentric hedonism*. But we also have a preference for the greater good – all things being equal, we prefer that there be less rather than more pain in the world overall, and also that there be more rather than less pleasure in the world overall. Hare doesn't have a name for this common preference, but we might call it a preference for the greater good. And these two preferences can conflict with one another. The main motivation of *OMOLIS* is to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting preferences.

Here's the idea. Many of us have various time-biased preferences. For example, all other things being equal, we prefer pain to be in the past rather than the future, and we prefer pain to be in the distant future rather than the near future. But we also prefer that the universe contain less pain overall

throughout its history (since we have a preference for the greater good). And these two preferences can conflict. Luckily there is a natural way to reconcile the relevant preferences. It's called The A-Theory. For if we say that there really are objective facts about which times are past, present, and future, then we can maintain that present pain has more disvalue than future pain which has more disvalue than past pain, and so on. And in this way, we can appeal to a certain view about the metaphysics of time to get the result that our time-biased preferences are perfectly consistent with our preference for the greater good. Problem solved.

Likewise, we can appeal to a certain view about the metaphysics of people (namely, egocentric presentism) to get the result that our mild egocentric hedonism is consistent with our preference for the greater good, after all. Since present pains (i.e., the ones that instantiate the property *presence*, a.k.a. your pains) have more disvalue than the pains experienced by others, it can turn out that your preference that x number of Russians, rather than you, suffer pain from accidents with boiling water is perfectly consistent with your preference for the greater good. Problem solved!

I have two main reactions to this line of reasoning, and I am afraid that neither one involves being persuaded by it. My first reaction is that endorsing a metaphysical theory in order to get the result that my various preferences are all compatible with one another is not the right way to do metaphysics. I want arguments for my metaphysical views, preferably with metaphysical premises, and I want those arguments to give me reasons to think that their conclusions are actually true. My second reaction to this line of reasoning is that the problem it's meant to solve was never really a problem to begin with. I have many preferences, and they are not all compatible with one another. This makes me irrational in a certain sense. So sue me. But it is no big deal, and it is certainly no cause to start endorsing strange metaphysical theories in a misguided attempt to achieve some kind of harmony among my various preferences.

(ii) *The official main argument for egocentric presentism.* Hare admits at the beginning of Chapter 5 that the above reason for endorsing egocentric presentism may seem to some like little more than wishful thinking. So he also offers the kind of argument from metaphysical premises to a metaphysical conclusion that I mentioned in the previous paragraph. The argument, in short, is that egocentric presentism allows one to make sense of some seemingly conflicting intuitions concerning personal identity that Hare

reports having (and apparently expects many of us to share). The intuitions concern a case in which the brain of a person, Adam, is replaced with a rudimentary, silicon pseudo-brain – able to “control the body’s vital functions and support a minimal substrate of perceptual experience (think Frankenstein’s monster, minus the ability to talk)” – while a duplicate of Adam is simultaneously created in the next room.² (Hare dubs the result of the replacement of Adam’s brain with a rudimentary, silicon pseudo-brain “Sili-Brain” and the duplicate of Adam who is created in the next room “Tele-Product”.) The first intuition Hare reports having concerns what would seem true “from the inside” (i.e., from the point of view of Adam before the bizarre surgery). And what would seem true from the inside, according to Hare, is that he might very well experience next what Tele-Product will be experiencing, and also that he might very well experience next what Sili-Brain will be experiencing.

Meanwhile, Hare reports that what seems true to him “from the outside” (i.e., from a third-person point of view) is that it is not possible that Adam is identical to Sili-Brain. (Hare’s reason is that he is convinced that “people are wholly physical things, with persistence conditions given by some form of a reductionist psychological approach to personal identity over time.” (*OMOLIS*, p. 85.))

These intuitions seem incompatible, but Hare argues that they are perfectly consistent if egocentric presentism is true. The reason has to do with what he takes to be the correct account of what it would seem like from the inside, if Hare were in Adam’s position. If Hare were in that unfortunate circumstance, he says, then it would seem to him that the unique property of presence might jump from his current brain and body (namely, Adam’s) to Tele-Product, and it would also seem to him that the property of presence might jump from Adam to Sili-Brain. And this is because both outcomes would indeed be metaphysically possible. But there is no conflict between saying this and saying that it is not metaphysically possible that Adam *will be* Sili-Brain. In other words, presence might jump from Adam to someone who is not the same person as Adam.

Now, many philosophers don’t share Hare’s specific intuitions about personal identity. (Eric Olson, for example, is convinced that Adam *is* Sili-

² *OMOLIS*, p. 58.

Brain, and could not possibly be Tele-Product.³) But Hare's argument is perhaps best understood in a way that is independent of his specific intuitions about this case. All his argument needs is the claim that it is possible that what would seem true from the inside in one of these cases can be inconsistent with what would seem true from the outside. And Hare's argument is that if egocentric presentism is true then there is no conflict in saying both of these things, since the claim about what would seem true from the inside is a claim about what might happen with respect to the property of presence, while the claim about what would seem true from the outside is a claim about identity over time, which is a completely different topic.

My main objection to this argument is that there are other ways to reconcile the apparent conflict between what would seem true from the inside and what would seem true from the outside. Here is my favorite. If I were in Adam's situation, I would think that my next experiences will probably be those of Sili-Brain, that my next experiences might be those of Tele-Product, and also that it is not possible that I will turn out to be identical to Tele-Product. But it would also seem to me that I might be fairly wrong about any one, or even all three, of these judgments. After all, one should always have a healthy lack of confidence in one's metaphysical judgments, and one should never have a credence of 1 in any such judgment.⁴ Moreover, there is nothing wrong, or unusual, about having nonzero credences in each of two competing propositions, even if you are certain that at least one of them must be necessarily false.

(iii) *The unofficial main argument for egocentric presentism.* When Hare officially introduces his full-blown version of egocentric presentism, in Chapter 3, he employs a thought experiment. He imagines going through a Cartesian epistemological process that involves throwing out all of his old beliefs and starting over from scratch, accepting only what appears to him to be certain. The process, as he describes it, involves a series of insights beginning with the following.

³ See Olson, *The Human Animal* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴ If I am being really careful about my credences, I should probably try to make sure that the sum of my credence that I will be Sili-Brain and my credence that I will be Tele-Product is less than or equal to 1. But doing so is presumably consistent with accommodating my original intuitions about the case.

Insight 1:

There are some things. Seemingly: a painting of Saint George and the Dragon, a telephone, a diary, a facial itch. Their nature remains obscure... All that can be said for sure is that these things, whatever they are, reveal themselves at this, first stage of the Cartesian exercise. They are *present*.

Insight 2:

There is a sentient being, CJH, with all and only the present things as perceptual objects. CJH sees the telephone, painting, and diary. CJH feels the itch. (*OMOLIS*, p. 21.)

Later, in Chapter 4, Hare reminds us of his Cartesian thought experiment.

In an effort to give you a grip [on the notion of monadic presence], I asked you to try out some Cartesian introspection: Wipe your epistemic slate clean. Forget where you are, forget who you are, forget that you are anybody at all. Now attend to the world. You will find that there are certain things. Take their appearing at this stage of introspection to be a feature of the things, not a feature of how they appear to you. They are present. (*OMOLIS*, p. 50.)

As Hare himself presents these considerations, they are not explicitly offered as an argument, or even a part of an argument, for egocentric presentism.⁵ But I think it is easy to find oneself being pulled by these remarks in that direction. All you can know for certain is that you exist, along with your experiences and the objects of your experiences. It seems likely that other selves also exist, with experiences of their own; but none of that is certain. Thus, what seems strikingly different about the experiences of those other apparent selves is that they merely stand in a two-place relation (*present-relative-to*) to their subjects, whereas your experiences instantiate the special, monadic property *presence*. And in this way the Cartesian line of thought seems to point toward egocentric presentism.

⁵ It is clear, though, that Mark Johnston, in the book's Introduction, does take the Cartesian thought experiment to be a part of the main argument for the book's thesis. (More on Johnston's Introduction below.)

Like I said, Hare does not explicitly offer this Cartesian line of thought as an argument for egocentric presentism, and I think it is probably a good thing that he doesn't, for the relevant argument strikes me as a bad one. It's not that your evidence, when you apply the proper Cartesian-level standards of certainty for justification, supports believing that you are special, the only one with genuinely present experiences, The One. Instead, your evidence supports believing that you are one of many conscious, physical objects with subjective experiences. Why? Because your evidence supports believing that you are a conscious human body, and also that there are many other organisms with conscious experiences, including salamanders, snakes, and seals (not to mention a few billion other humans). So your evidence supports the hypothesis that you are one among many conscious organisms, and that presence is a two-place relation between an experience or an object and a conscious organism. Or so it seems to me.

(iv) *The unauthorized argument for egocentric presentism.* There is one other notable argument for egocentric presentism to be found within the pages of this book, although it is not contained in the part of the book by Hare. It is in the Introduction, which is written by Mark Johnston.⁶

Here it is crucial to realize that Hare is in effect assuming a version of what philosophers have called the "no-self" or "no-ownership" theory, namely, that the presentations of objects and experiences that make up our conscious life are not presentations of objects and experiences *to a subject or self*...

... If presence is never presence to someone or other, if objects and experiences are just present *sans phrase*, then the only thing to conclude from reflection on one's own scalding and the scaldings of all those unfortunate Russians is that while one's own pains are present, their pains are not present. (Johnston, Introduction to *OMOLIS*, pp. xii-xiii.)

⁶ I call this the unauthorized argument for egocentric presentism because, although it is suggested by Johnston in the Introduction to the book, I am not able to find it in the main text. (Johnston quite appropriately cites and quotes Hume when introducing the no-self view. I find it telling that Hare himself never cites or quotes Hume.)

This does seem like a powerful argument for egocentric presentism. But of course the easiest way to resist it is to deny the no-self view.⁷ And as I mentioned above, it seems to me that my evidence supports the hypothesis that I am a conscious organism (and hence a self) in a world with many other conscious beings.

I would like to close by raising one final line of questioning that Hare does not address in *OMOLIS*. What, according to egocentric presentism, is the metaphysical mechanism or backstory for the alleged fact that presence attaches to the experiences of just one person? Why should that be true? And given that it is true, why is it that it is this one person whose experiences presence attaches to, rather than someone else? If you are a standard modal actualist with ersatz possible worlds, so that you think of the one actual world among the many abstract possible worlds as being made true (and thus actual) by the one concrete world, then you will have an easy answer to the modal analogue of this line of questioning.⁸ Likewise, if you are a standard presentist with ersatz times, so that you think of the one present time among the many abstract times as being made true (and thus present) by the one concrete world, then you will have an easy answer to the temporal analogue of this line of questioning.⁹ But it is difficult to see how the egocentric presentist is supposed to respond to this line of questioning.¹⁰

⁷ There are other ways to resist the argument. For example, the proponent of the no-self view may insist that all experiences – whether coincident with these experiences here or coincident with other experiences, elsewhere – are on a par; they are all equally present. (Thanks to Ted Sider for this point.)

⁸ For a discussion of this approach see David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Basil Blackwell, 1986).

⁹ For more on this approach see Markosian, “A Defense of Presentism.”

¹⁰ I am grateful to Ted Sider and Stephan Torre for helpful comments on an earlier draft.